DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 327 002 EA 022 590

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TITLE How To Keep Your School and Students Safe. Tips for Principals from NASSP.
INSTITUTION National Association of Secondary School Principals, Reston, Va.
PUB DATE Mar 90
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Collected Works - Serials (022) --

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Responsibility; Crime; Delinquency; Elementary Secondary Education; *Juvenile Gangs; *Principals; *School Safety; School Security; Violence

ABSTRACT

Increased violence in the schools necessitates the identification of potential gang development and formation of preventive safety policies. Included in this bulletin for principals are steps for gang activity identification, preventive strategies, appropriate responses to altercations, and guidelines for security and supervision of outside-group-sponsored activities. (2 references) (LMI)

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Tips for Principals from NASSP March 1990

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How To Keep Your School and Students Safe

Many administrators—especially principals in urban areas—are dealing with increased student violence on campus. This violence goes beyond the occasional scuffles between students or incidents of bullying—it sometimes results in death. Some of this violence can be linked to a resurgence of gangs within the school and the surrounding community and to the presence of outsiders on the school campus—both authorized and unauthorized.

Youth Gangs in the School

For far too many of our school districts, the presence of youth gangs has become a serious and unsettling reality. While youth gangs are not a new phenomenon for those schools located within many of our major cities and larger urban areas, the level of violence that has been attributed to these gangs is new.

With frightening frequency, young people are killing their peers in and around schools. Any administrator who has experienced a homicide knows the effect it has on the school staff members, students, and community.

It has become a daily battle to make schools safe places for students and staff members. Some schools have adopted strict policies that forbid the wearing or displaying of certain colors. Others have banned the wearing of certain types of jackets or hats. Some schools have established "safe" zones where all gang members agree that no gang activity, including recruitment or retaliation, will take place.

If ever there was a need for a school or district to be active, it is in the area of identifying potential gang development. This requires an accurate and timely intelligence-gathering network.

Identifying Gangs and Gang Activity

First, meet with the local law enforcement agency to ascertain whether or not gang activity is developing in the school and community. Learn what their criteria are for assessing the information they receive. One of the criteria should be: Do these individuals engage in delinquent/criminal behavior? Students "hanging out" together do not constitute a "gang." Students who live in the same neighborhood, play sports together, or share some other interest naturally spend time together. Most of us had a particular group of youngsters we hung around with in school.

Suggested definitions for identifying a delinquent gang, gang member, or gang activity follow:

- *Delinquent gang*: a group of six or more people who, while acting in concert, have committed a crime or some delinquent act, or who have engaged in an activity that disrupted the orderly operation of a school or school activity. In addition, group members must share some common bond, i.e., community ties, school association, race, sex, attitude, philosophy, or interest. Finally, to be considered a delinquent gang, there must exist some infrastructure that facilitates the carrying out of common objectives.
- *Gang member:* an individual who acknowledges membership in a delinquent gang and who is recognized by other members of the gang as being part of that group. In addition, the individual must clearly demonstrate his or her commitment and affiliation to the general membership.
- *Gang activity:* an overt act that is confirmed by two independent sources—one of whom is reliable—as involving gang members.

Males are not the only ones who form gangs. Females also are involved in gang activity and violence. A study conducted in three school districts in the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Area surveyed administrators about school conflict and violence (Reed, 1983). According to the respondents, there are fundamental differences between school conflicts involving males and those involving females.

The respondents indicated that females are more likely to gang up on other females, carry grudges longer, and react negatively to gossip. Males, they said, erupt more spontaneously and fight physically over something specific.

If gang activity does pose a threat in the school, the administrator can use several strategies to prevent possible assaults (Blauvelt, 1981):

1. Assign school personnel to specific areas of the school

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during times when students are not directly supervised.
2. Establish a channel of communication that will warn school personnel of an altercation. This communications system should include students and staff members.
3. Develop information sources in the school and community and share this information with school staff members and administrators.
4. Establish a rumor control center if reports of pending fights/assaults persist.

If there is an altercation, the response should be:
1. *Walk* to the site of the altercation and, using an authoritative voice, state that the altercation must stop immediately. If possible, obtain help from other staff members along the way.
2. After analyzing the situation, attempt to separate the combatants. Be wary of weapons.
3. Obtain any needed medical assistance and call the police/security if necessary.
4. Disperse onlookers.
5. Ask one staff member to record the names of witnesses, ask another to remain with injured students, and ask another staff member to remain with the assailant(s) until police/security or the administrator who is going to conduct the investigation arrives.
6. Preserve the crime scene if necessary.

By discussing the problems and possibilities of gang activity with the appropriate law enforcement agencies and other community groups before gangs become a reality, schools stand an excellent chance of eliminating the problem before it develops.

Outsiders on Campus

Another area of concern involves the use of schools for fund-raising activities by groups or individuals who are not part of the school system or by school groups who use outside talent to raise money.

Usually, when a school plans an evening activity such as an athletic event, school play, or dance, there is not an overriding concern for attendees' safety. However, when the activity involves the appearance of individuals or groups who have no affiliation with the school or school system, there is reason to use some safeguards to ensure a safe and orderly activity.

During the initial planning stage, school personnel should develop an activity checklist that will address the security/supervision concerns for each event. Such a plan should address the following issues:
1. *General information about the event:*
- Type of activity
- Sponsor
- Estimated cost for the activity
- Anticipated number of attendees
- How cost of the activity will be met
- Name of the school administrator responsible for the event
- Name and affiliation of each adult chaperon. It is recommended that there be one adult for every 100 students.

2. *Specific information about the person or group performing:*
- Name of the individual/group
- Name, address (do not accept a P.O. box number) and phone number of person responsible for the individual/group
- A written contract setting forth what is to be provided by each side, including a fee, a clear understanding that the school determines how many persons may be admitted to the event, and that payment will be made by school check only
- A list of previous appearances, the name of the contact person for each site listed, and assurance from these individuals that the experience in working with the individual/group was positive
- If warranted, a posted bond for the repair of damage that might occur as a result of the event
- Proof of liability insurance that will hold the school blameless in the event of a civil law suit.

The purpose of the activity checklist is to ensure that the right questions have been addressed prior to the event. This is truly a case of an ounce of prevention being worth a pound of cure.

Forewarned is forearmed. A school administration must be the controller of events rather than be controlled by them.

References

Blauvelt, Peter D. *Effective Strategies for School Security.* Reston, Va.: NASSP, 1981. This book is now available from Peter Blauvelt, Director of Security Services, Department of Security Services, Prince George's County Public Schools, 507 Largo Rd., Upper Marlboro, Md. 20772.

Reed, Rodney J. "Administrator's Advice: Causes and Remedies of School Conflict and Violence." *NASSP Bulletin,* April 1983.

Tips for Principals *is a bimonthly publication of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1904 Association Drive, Reston, Virginia 22091. John A. Lammel, President; Timothy J. Dyer, Executive Director; Thomas F. Koerner, Director of Publications; Carol Bruce, Associate Director; Patricia Lucas George, Editor.*